

Things Fall Apart By Chinua Achebe



Review by Genie Bolduc

A wonderful narrative written by Chinua Achebe of Nigeria about tribal life in Africa and the ensuing invasion of what at first seemed like well meaning missionaries but turned into colonial intrusion and destruction of communities and their tribal traditions. It is the story of Okonkwo, a man revered in the Igbo village for being a great wrestler and a successful and strong leader. He is haunted by his father's lack of success and laziness and this drives him to need his own success in a way in which it soon becomes clear will lead to trouble and eventually his demise.

The traditions laced throughout the narrative are interesting and kept me enthralled with the book; bride price, superstition, animal and mineral deities, village elders, priestesses, ogbange children (miscarriages) who are thought to come again and again to torment families, the egwugwu who are actually men impersonating spirits in ceremonies but quite scary, the casting off and abandonment of twins, that strangers must come to take down the body of a suicide as it is a grave sin so the villagers cannot, the Week of Peace, using cowries as currency, etc.

There are so many interesting passages in the book, almost proverbs like "yam stood for manliness, and he who could feed his family on yams from one harvest to another was a very great man indeed. Okonkwo wanted his son to be a great farmer and a great man."

Many of the quotes from the book remind me of how differently we think. When I read this passage on locusts "And at last the locusts did descend. They settled on every tree and on every blade of grass; they settled on the roofs and covered the bare ground. Mighty tree branches broke away under them, and the whole country became the brown-earth color of the vast, hungry swarm." I was worried that the tribe would starve but instead they got baskets to trap the locusts as food and feasted.

I was fascinated by the appearance of simplicity of Okonkwo's life but the number of things that are learned and understood as part of their everyday traditions. Killing of a clansman is known to be a crime against the earth goddess and depending on if it was on purpose or accidental the punishment is clear and known to all. When Okonkwo's gun accidentally goes off and kills someone in the clan he knows exactly what the punishment is. He must leave the village for seven years, returning to his mother's clan, losing all the wealth and status that he had amassed. These were traditions they were taught and did not go against.

The most telling line in the book is "The white man is very clever. He came quietly and peaceably with his religion. We were amused at his foolishness and allowed him to stay. Now he has won our brothers, and our clan can no longer act like one. He has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart." The arrival of the missionaries heralded the division of their tribe and ultimately its decline and certainly the end of the world as Okonkwo knew it.

Things fell apart and lead to Okonkwo's destruction and the destruction of his tribe's culture and way of life.

It is a wonderful but sad tale.